

INTERVIEW

DANIEL ELLSBERG

PEACE

WARRIOR

BY TOM CLARK

It may surprise some Americans to know that the
most articulate spokesman of the peace movement

★ ★ today is *not* a pacifist. ★ ★



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOCK McDONALD

Daniel Ellsberg believes in the use of arms— for self-defense. He also believes the initiation of war cannot be justified by a vote.

Ellsberg is a brilliant and complicated man who went from government insider to outcast overnight. Whatever he believes he believes completely—with an almost messianic fervor.

For twenty years America has known him as the man who blew the whistle on Vietnam. Now he speaks out tirelessly for a negotiated end to the conflict in the Middle East. Last year, in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, Ellsberg began an accelerated burst of public activism meant to help avert war.

Where has he been since the Pentagon Papers? Organizing within the antinuclear movement, protesting at nuclear test sites and power plants, and getting himself arrested—in other words, living out his commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience.

Events shaped the complexity of his character early. Born of middle-class Jewish parents who converted to Christian Science, he was bright and disciplined. His mother set out to make him a concert pianist with a rigorous daily practice schedule from the time he was five years old. Sports were discouraged—he might hurt his hands. But the protection and direction his mother contributed to his life was erased suddenly and violently, when his father apparently fell asleep at the wheel of the family car, and his mother and sister were killed. Daniel, then fifteen, survived the accident, though he was in a coma for thirty-six hours. This early trauma has, he believes, colored his life and his character in profound ways.

Despite the tragedy, Ellsberg has lived a life of privilege. He has enjoyed the best America has to offer: a prep school education, a scholarship to Harvard, a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. Volunteering for the Marines was his way of paying back the system—and he did so enthusiastically, becoming commander of a crack infantry company just after the Korean War.

He later worked his way up in the national security bureaucracy, as a Rand Corporation consultant and Pentagon whiz kid. By 1964 he was special assistant to John McNaughton, who served as Secretary of State Robert McNamara's deputy for foreign affairs. Ellsberg went to Vietnam in 1965, inspired by Abraham Lincoln's dictates for fighting a *just* war: "with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

Several years later, having lost faith in the justice of the war, a defiant Ellsberg photocopied a top-secret Pentagon study he'd helped to write, and, unable to get the collection of classified documents aired in the Senate, turned it over to the *New York Times*.

Though publication of the notorious Pentagon Papers in

1971 at first changed little, by an irony of history Ellsberg's outrageous gesture eventually succeeded where other attempts at ending the war had failed. Within two years, the blundering of Richard Nixon's "plumbers" led not only to the dismissal of felony charges against Ellsberg but indirectly—by way of the Watergate scandal revelations—to the overthrow of the war government.

Throughout his public career—as high-level war planner and as Gandhian war resister—Ellsberg has critically engaged the American way of life, economic order, and value systems. In 1990 he launched a new crusade, a marathon of nonviolent



Ellsberg at war — on the line in Vietnam:
"The truth is, battle can be an exciting,
intense experience."

protests, rallies, vigils, and teach-ins aimed at preventing war in the Persian Gulf.

Ellsberg is a driven man. But, approaching sixty, he is not invulnerable to the strains of nonstop campaigning for the peace cause. A hastily improvised public-appearance schedule had deprived him of sleep for a seventy-two-hour stretch in the week before our meetings. When I caught up with him, he was enjoying a brief respite from his travels at his spacious, tranquil Kensington home with his wife, Patricia Marx. The

home's serene setting, a hillside redwood glade looking out across coldly shimmering bay waters to the Marin Headlands and Mount Tamalpais, provided a perfect site for thoughtful conversation.

Ellsberg builds his thoughts as extended arguments, in the manner of a man trained in concise logic (as indeed he was), but he is also a surprisingly—sometimes disarmingly—candid witness to his own life, and he speaks with a mixture of rationality, humor, flashes of acid irony, and occasional, unexpected outbursts of strong emotion. (At certain points in our conversation, when recalling his experience in Vietnam, he was moved to tears.)

When Ellsberg learned on January 16 that war had begun in the Persian Gulf—which he did through inside sources hours before the news media got word—"it was," he says, "as if I'd been mourning for some time and finally a death occurred."

SAN FRANCISCO FOCUS: What is it that propels men to go to war? Do you think men actually enjoy the experience?

DANIEL ELLSBERG: The truth is, if you live through it, and if you don't get your legs or your genitals blown off, battle can be very interesting and exciting. For the most part I enjoyed the



Ellsberg against war — getting arrested at the Rocky Flats weapons plant: "There is a time when silence is a lie."

combat experience that I had. The kind of intense experiences that you see in the movie *Platoon* . . . I hardly *breathed* through the last hour of *Platoon*. I came out and was hyperventilating for about half an hour. No movie has ever affected me physically like that one, because I was reliving the experience. I can empathize with the teenagers—and even some older people—who looked *forward* to a war in the Gulf with some anticipation.

Of course, to begin with, to make the decision to go into

combat you have to be in some kind of state of unawareness, of indoctrination.

Now, I can hardly imagine how I did things like go down into Viet Cong tunnels, like that guy in the movie did. I actually went into one tunnel and found lots of letters—which I had intelligence translate, they turned out to be love letters—and candles, warm candles, which meant someone had very recently been there. I cannot rethink myself into the skin of the person who went down there.

It wasn't as good as lovemaking or body-surfing, let's say. But by the standards of most things, it was a very interesting way to spend your time. These young soldiers now will enjoy parts of it, the camaraderie and excitement. It's as exciting as being in the Mafia. It is a project, an enterprise, no more worthy and productive—socially—than what you see in the movie *Goodfellas*. Just recently—I don't know what brought this into my head—I was thinking of my experience in Vietnam as if I had participated in a gang rape, one that was not lethal to the victim. It can't be that everyone who participates in such a rape—after all, the perpetrators are legion—could honestly say they totally failed to enjoy it. But it may well be that as they get a bit older, these men in the Gulf will look back and say—as so many did after Vietnam—"Well, I was wrong. *What the hell was I doing?*"

SF Focus: You saw the casualties up close, but you also worked directly with the architects of the Vietnam War. What happens to the leaders when they begin to see the human costs?

ELLSBERG: The traditional thing for men in power in such a circumstance is to redouble their efforts and expand their aims, to become even more ambitious to justify the losses they've already incurred. That seems to be happening in the Gulf.

The president is becoming more determined to destroy not only Iraq's nuclear and chemical capabilities and its advanced technology, which can eventually be done from the air. He seems determined to destroy the Republican Guard divisions as well, which are currently in deep underground bunkers. That means he's taken on a military task that will require soldiers and Marines to go against the most elaborate field fortifications in the world—the same fortifications that cost hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives over the last decade.

It's a mad policy, but it's the ordinary male madness of men in power during wartime: to be very reckless with other people's lives rather than to back down.

SF Focus: Are you equating George Bush with Saddam Hussein and the Ayatollah Khomeini?

ELLSBERG: It would be absurd to suggest that Bush and Hussein are in any way similar in background or personality. But in terms of the policies that they pursue they are not so different.

From a legal point of view, Bush's invasion of Panama was identical to the invasion of Kuwait. The United Nations condemned it as aggression, and the justice of the World Court condemned our aggression against Nicaragua when Bush was vice president. If America doesn't see those parallels, that is too bad for America. And let's not forget our government's support of Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. It was, very simply, an evil policy. The support we gave to him,

and occasionally to Khomeini, over those eight years was appalling. And of course, our support for the regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala is equivalent to supporting Saddam's regime.

In the mirror of this war we can see that our society needs a lot of transfiguring.

SF Focus: George Bush says that things are changing—that we're on the verge of a "new world order." How do you respond to that?

ELLSBERG: Actually, our president seems peculiarly stuck in what you might call the old way of thinking. That is, the old Cold War framework, and the ideologies of machismo and patriarchy and materialism that go back thousands of years.

Our president is a fool. He is profoundly shallow. He seems in such a dangerous way the counterpart of Saddam Hussein. Neither is a very plausible champion of a new world order. They are both willing to sacrifice many thousands of their own countrymen and others rather than appear weak or unmanly and back away from foolish commitments they've made.

These two willful men have chosen to roll the iron dice of war, to use a phrase of the German militarists, rather than to negotiate.

If anything, Bush is even more inclined to personalize this as a duel. It's the wrong metaphor. It's not a duel at all. It's a forest fire, in an area with no forests, and people are going to be burning all over the Middle East—probably by the time your readers see this interview.

SF Focus: Now, unlike in the Vietnam era, many people are struggling with how to oppose the conflict and support the troops at the same time. Is it possible to do both?

ELLSBERG: There is a popular—but mistaken—belief, encouraged by the government, that to support our troops in wartime means to support our president and the policies that put those troops at risk. It's a widespread feeling that we should rally around the president in a time like this—even when the president may have caused the problem and is enlarging it. I've been trying to understand it.

The logic of it rests in the fact that people associate war with a fight for survival against a powerful enemy, something on the model of World War II. But

that's not what this war is about. Our national security is not threatened. The president is assuring us that there's no need for extra taxes, there's no need for a draft, and in fact, there was no need to postpone the Super Bowl. He's so anxious to make this war as popular as possible by making it unburdensome to the public, that the only sacrifice he's asking of us is to give up the First Amendment and our democratic processes. I would say that's a big price.

SF Focus: You wrote recently that Congress has given George Bush the powers of George III. Do you think he's really operating with that sort of autocratic arrogance?

ELLSBERG: We know little about Bush's decision-making. He appears to have been quite isolated in government in his commitment to the possibility of actually carrying his threats out. It does point to what Thomas Paine called "the pride of kings." For Paine, this was the key element in the cause of war: the danger of allowing a human, a man at the pinnacle of power, to think of the armed forces as extensions of his own hands. He loses his sense of the boundary between the state and himself.

Paine saw that as an extremely dangerous situation, as did the framers of our Constitution, who deliberately sought to divorce the decision over war and peace from the man who was in charge of the management of our forces. And remember, there wasn't a lot of popular support for this war—rather than for some lesser involvement—until Congress voted.

SF Focus: But the war came swiftly after the vote. Marlin Fitzwater announced it by saying, "The liberation of Kuwait has begun." Do you think that's a euphemism?

ELLSBERG: Obviously. Although the president is always citing the UN resolutions as his basis, the war began with objectives that went beyond those resolutions. The first targets were nuclear and chemical facilities along with airfields, command and control centers, and so forth. But the targets were primarily in Iraq. So I think the president has shown that his objectives go far beyond Kuwait, and his means may actually foretell Kuwait's annihilation. I'm afraid that if things continue as they are going, twenty-five years from now Kuwait will be remembered as the

country that had to be destroyed in order to be liberated.

SF Focus: Hussein has already taken actions that have outraged the international community: bombing civilians in Israel, using POWs as human shields, dumping oil into the Gulf—which he did before against Iran—among other things. To what lengths will we go to win this war?

ELLSBERG: I think that what is likely is a very high proportion of Americans calling for the use of nuclear weapons for the first time. That's never happened before. In Korea and Vietnam, the percentage of the public in polls that called for deploying nuclear weapons never got much above 10 percent. Already we've had one member of Congress call for using nuclear weapons against Iraq. But, most likely, Bush would resist their use.

I think the ultimate US response will be unrestrained bombing of the population with non-nuclear weapons. All restraints will be off attacks on military targets and there may or may not be direct, explicit attacks on population. But even if there's not a formal targeting of civilian population, I think that there will no longer be any real restrictions on what is called "collateral damage."

SF Focus: Thus far, Israel has refrained from counterattacking. Do you think it will enter the war?

ELLSBERG: Saddam almost surely could bring Israel into the war, if he were willing to send enough planes over and willing to lose most of his air force in order to get a half-dozen planes through with nerve gas. That in turn would probably cause not only Israel's entry into the war, but Israel's nuclear entry into the war, which is probably why Saddam has not done it so far.

SF Focus: This is the first major war that has been covered by the media in "real time." But the initial rush of coverage left Americans feeling that the war had already been won. Are we sacrificing accuracy and analysis for immediacy?

ELLSBERG: On that first night, I watched the news with some bemusement because what we were hearing was that this was a war like no other in history. In fact, it was a day such as had never occurred in any war in history, where everything had worked right and there were no accounts of civilian

deaths or allied casualties, and all the targets had been destroyed.

Within a couple of days, of course, as the supposedly destroyed Scuds began hitting Israel, it was clear that this was a war like other wars. And like other wars, it's likely to be much longer and bloodier than both the public was led to believe and the president himself expected.

SF Focus: Before the end of the second week, one White House reporter said, "Americans are starting to worry that the war will take longer than usual. Americans are used to quick victories."

ELLSBERG: That's a very strange comment—are they comparing it only to Panama? That wasn't a war in any real sense. You could call it a police action if it hadn't been so blatantly illegal. It was a vigilante action. But it did involve the kind of enormous asymmetry of military strength that we associate with police. What happened in Panama has nothing to do with this. There's no way to police a state such as Iraq that has been so generously armed by a score of arms suppliers from all over the world, including ourselves.

SF Focus: How do you read Saddam's actions in those first weeks of war?

ELLSBERG: My best guess is that Saddam concluded—with some good reasons—that Bush's intention was either to humiliate him to the point where he would lose office or to destroy him and his military forces. In response, he took the brutal, ruthless path of inviting the US to lose a lot of its men in a ground battle. And then he'll bargain.

In effect, he's making the choice that Ho Chi Minh made. The circumstances are different, but at one point, Ho Chi Minh told the French, "You will kill ten of ours, and we will kill one of yours, but in the end it is you who will tire." Saddam seems to be making exactly the same calculation: that we will kill more Iraqis, but that he will kill enough Americans to improve the final terms.

SF Focus: Bush has promised the American people that this will not be another Vietnam. As the days go by, however, more and more comparisons between the two wars are made by the press and by peace activists like yourself.

ELLSBERG: People like me are accused of seeing all wars through the lens of Vietnam in a negative way. But the

reality is that Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Colin Powell are so determined to fight this war the way they believe that Vietnam *should* have been fought, that they are indeed re-fighting the last war. They are using an air strategy which is the very one they think should have been followed in Vietnam. Well, it is a very different situation now, and there is no strong basis for believing that this is the right way to do it this time.

There are some very startling parallels between the two wars. Saddam, for all of his modern military equipment, is following a guerrilla strategy not unlike that of Ho Chi Minh. He is avoiding premature combat, he is husbanding his military resources. And he's using tunnels and underground command bunkers the way the Viet Cong did to evade our firepower. That seems to have come as something of a secret weapon to us. I don't understand why, because these command posts were apparently made by western firms, West German in particular.

SF Focus: Are you motivated to speak out against the war in the Gulf because of your involvement—what you might feel as your complicity—in Vietnam? Are you ashamed of your early support of that war?

ELLSBERG: I didn't do any specific thing that in retrospect seems to me terribly shameful. I might feel differently if I'd ever targeted another human being and shot at him, but like most soldiers, I never had that experience. There are very few soldiers that have, actually, and in Vietnam that was especially true. I shot at treelines, where fire was coming at us. My son has asked me if I killed anybody. I have no way of knowing. The experience of shooting at a treeline, when you're receiving fire, just seemed so absolving, so natural and automatic at the time. And I never did do any bombing.

People often infer that I have acted out of guilt. I've always said, sincerely, that I don't have a sense of guilt about what I did. I did what seemed to me right at the time. But because I did participate, I felt I had a direct responsibility to correct the situation when I realized that it was going wrong . . . or that it had been wrong from the start and was getting worse.

This responsibility was greater than the average American's, or even the

average official's, because I had been in the Pentagon. But when Robert McNamara, for example, was fired in 1968 for trying to put a lid on the bombing and get negotiations started, he walked off and never said another word. That was incomprehensible to me. I judged him very harshly for it—I felt, good God, this is a guy who knows so much about the course of the war and could speak up with so much authority, and he could *stop this war!*

SF Focus: During the thick of Vietnam you were a civilian with the government, yet you sought out combat, even though you didn't have to. Why?

ELLSBERG: I was willing to do anything. My job by then was as special assistant to the deputy ambassador, who was formally in charge of pacification. But in fact I could do anything I wanted to do, go out and observe, or whatever. So I had a perfectly good excuse to be with the troops.

SF Focus: But you weren't just with the troops—you toured the frontline units, fighting with one, then moving on to the next. That could be looked at as suicidal behavior.

ELLSBERG: At the time that I was fighting with the frontline units, I'd just broken up, temporarily, it turned out, with Patricia. This was around August 1966. We broke up over my association with the war. I realized years later the real reason I was doing it. I had a certain pattern in my life: when I broke up with or lost someone that I loved, I immediately went and did something very dangerous, or got involved in a dangerous project.

SF Focus: Have you ever been able to determine what made you take such risks?

ELLSBERG: It's no doubt related to my mother's death, in a car accident when I was fifteen. I've done these dangerous things at least half a dozen times since then. For example, when my first wife told me she wanted a divorce, I fulfilled a lifelong ambition by jumping out of an airplane with a parachute two days later. I didn't see any connection at the time.

It took me years to figure it all out—and I didn't even find out in psychoanalysis.

SF Focus: But what were you thinking when you went out on these patrols? Why were you deliberately risking your life?

ELLSBERG: In Da Nang, I was with a Combined Action Patrol, half Vietnamese. That's when I think I got hepatitis. I spent a night in a rice paddy, about February of '67. I seemed to be at the end of something. I'd broken up with Patricia, I'd fallen in love with another woman, a Vietnamese woman who'd been educated at the French lycée—but then she'd left me. I decided, okay, that's really it. I'm thirty-six, I've lived long enough. So I went out on patrol week after week after that. I thought, well, I enjoy this, it's an interesting way to go.

There were times, actually, when I needed a helmet and didn't have it. There was one two-week period when I saw a lot of combat, went out with one patrol after another, almost around the clock, and got shot at a lot. I also got mortared. That was one moment when you could not borrow a helmet. Downstairs I've got the tail of one mortar shell that missed killing me by about fifteen seconds.

SF Focus: This may also be part of what you call "the ordinary male madness" that drives men to war. Do women really respond differently to the idea of war?

ELLSBERG: There is a very sharp difference in the attitudes of women and men to war. I've learned a lot on this particular issue from Patricia, who is very eloquent on the subject, privately and publicly. And as she is daily pointing out to me as she watches the evening news, it is men much more than women who are fascinated by the technology of warfare, and by the use of violence.

Women and men have a very different attitude about the idea of war as an instrument of policy, also. That's not a peculiarity of this conflict—it was true in Korea and in Vietnam. Interestingly, it was not true in World War II, which was accepted by the whole society as a necessary war. But when it comes to "optional" wars—that is, wars that are not in any real way compelled by a struggle for our national survival—there is a gender difference.

SF Focus: And yet women have been primarily focused on issues such as health and childcare, abortion rights. Do you see them taking leadership positions on war issues?

ELLSBERG: Well, it is incumbent on women to take on the problem of vio-

lence. Obviously, individual women have been very prominent in the fight against war. But women's groups have not taken on war—in particular, militarism and the arms race—as a women's problem, as a major item on the agenda of mainstream women's organizations.

Women might protest that they have their own issues, issues much closer to them, that they need to organize around. I think it's a women's issue because men are predominantly on the other side—on the wrong side. You cannot wait for the men in power to address it.

War and peace was a prominent, almost central issue for the first forty years of the organized women's movement. The movement lost that character for a lot of reasons. It was a matter of political conception, accommodation to the power structure, that the movement sort of dropped that issue and concentrated more narrowly on women's issues.

But I think women should face this question: What is the position of women in a society based on the preparation for war and the threat of war and the practice of war? The subordination of women and societal aggressiveness are closely related—it's even hard to say which causes the other. They go together.

I actually think that the arms race, the resurgence of the Cold War, led by Ronald Reagan before he was in office and then as president, represented a male backlash to the women's movement. I think it was in part a response to feminism—and a way of reverting to a social system in which women's power and voice could be resisted.

SF Focus: That's fascinating—and discouraging.

ELLSBERG: It's not discouraging, because it's an avenue for hope. It points to a direction in which things really could change. Half our society consists of people—women—who, whether through genetics or socialization, are less fascinated by violence and by technology than the other half. And they're less inclined to believe what men in power tell them. As they strive for power and influence in society, they have a real chance to change the nature of power—to move toward a much less hierarchical, less militaristic society.

SF Focus: In his State of the Union address George Bush said that this is a moral war, a just war. You obviously don't agree. But do you think such a thing as a just war even exists today?

ELLSBERG: I am not a total pacifist. As a young man, I'd always had a total abhorrence of mass, indiscriminate violence. But my service in the Marines gave me an acceptance of the utility of certain limited forms of institutionalized violence.

I believe that among the appropriate instruments of national policy and international order, a capability for armed self-defense has a role—along with a lot of other policies that are at least as important—in assuring our security. An ability to defend ourselves by nonoffensive means, means that do not threaten offensive action against neighbors, is justifiable and even important. It's not more important than having good relations with good neighbors and pursuing diplomacy and sound international economic policies. But I can see that the ability to deter and to defend against an Iraqi attack into Saudi Arabia was certainly justifiable for the Saudis to begin with and for others to help them.

However, I think the idea of a just war has to be seen as it was originally envisioned—almost entirely in the context of self-defense. The counterpart is to say that almost no initiation of war—war that is not thrust upon you by an attack on your own defenses or people—can be justified. Initiating war should not be regarded as an optional instrument of policy. The choice of war we've just made is certainly not just, and can't really be made just by vote of Congress or the UN.

To say that the attack on Kuwait started the war is extremely misleading. It was not a war between the US and Iraq by any stretch. It was an aggression by Saddam Hussein which called for, and which got, an effective response by the international community. But war was not the answer to that aggression. War is the choice George Bush made.

SF Focus: But he as much as says that war was his only choice.

ELLSBERG: Kuwait's independence had every prospect of being achieved by a combination of sanctions and diplomacy. He still has the option to do that and to genuinely explore what it

would take to bring peace to the region. If it takes a Mideast conference or if it takes adjudication of border disputes, that's almost no price at all.

What is far too costly to be justified is the idea of destroying entrenched Iraqi ground troops by ground defenses of our own. And those of us who can see that that's a needless sacrifice of American and Iraqi lives—civilian and military—owe it to the troops to make ourselves heard by every channel. Letters, town meetings, and teach-ins, as well as demonstrations and nonviolent civil disobedience.

SF Focus: Many people feel that anti-war activists are unpatriotic. You debated Rear Admiral Robert Spiro on that very topic recently. Yet you predict that the longer the war goes on, the stronger public support of the peace movement will become. Why?

ELLSBERG: Even though it is unpopular now, the peace movement will be heard. And the more it's heard, the sooner those ideas may take hold. It would be safer for peace movement people to act like congressmen, to keep their heads down while the war is popular and wait until the flow of body bags changes majority sentiment against the war. But to do that is to acquiesce to those deaths. We have an obligation to the troops to do what we can right now. There is a time when silence is a lie. Silence is complicity and silence is betrayal of the troops and of ourselves and of our country, and unpopular or not, we need to speak out some bitter truths.

SF Focus: During your tenure as a Pentagon consultant on Vietnam, you drafted a list of options for Henry Kissinger. Did you two see eye to eye at that time?

ELLSBERG: No. He said that I ought to have included a "win" option. I told him there was no win option, and that if he thought there was a way to win the war at any price, it was just self-delusion. Kissinger also pointed out to me—and this I haven't ever reported—that I had failed to include a "threat" option. I said that I hadn't done so because I really didn't think threat options held any promise at that point. In the second version, at his request, I did include a threat option—but only for completeness. "After all, we've actually been bombing them," I told him. We had already dropped 50 percent

more bombs on Vietnam than we'd dropped in all of World War II, so it didn't seem to me that the threat of further bombing held much promise.

His response to that remains very significant right up to this moment: "How can you conduct diplomacy without a threat?"

I said, "Henry, a lot of negotiations are carried out without threatening to bomb anyone!"

SF Focus: But during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, working as a consulting analyst in the secret war council of the Pentagon, you reportedly expressed concern lest we give Khrushchev the idea we would not carry out our threat. Isn't that the same threat strategy you now question?

ELLSBERG: The Cuban missile crisis was a case where I thought a lot was at stake: Berlin, in particular, and our whole position in NATO. It was a case where I was thoroughly in favor of making the threats—not nuclear threats, but threats to attack the missiles and to invade—and at the same time quite consciously, I was totally against the idea of actually carrying out those threats. I thought—quite wrong-

ly—that Khrushchev had to back down and that there was no chance of nuclear war.

SF Focus: You've since said that you were shocked to discover that President Kennedy had privately placed the odds of war at "somewhere between one out of three and even." What made you so confident the threat policy was going to work?

ELLSBERG: Kennedy had been in a war. I hadn't really been to war. I later learned a lot from Vietnam about what war really is. The people on the inside who felt fear during the Cuban missile crisis were the people who'd been in a war. Kennedy had a sense of what really happens in a war—not just the unexpected but the fuck-up, the total fuck-up. I had come out of the Marines four or five years earlier, but I'd never been in a war. It seemed to me at the time that Khrushchev was not a crazy man, that he had to fold his hand, and that we could control the situation.

SF Focus: In that instance the opponent did fold. Did that confirm in your mind the effectiveness of threat as war policy in time of crisis?

ELLSBERG: It did then. Not until three

years later, as we were deep into operation in Vietnam, did I get my own education in what really happens in a war situation: Things are not under control. The whole idea of control is an illusion.

In that kind of situation, people who should fold don't necessarily do it. They might—look at Khrushchev. But Ho Chi Minh had been under the same threats, and he hadn't folded.

Now suppose Saddam Hussein goes on acting like Ho Chi Minh. Then the next question would be, is George Bush like Lyndon Johnson? Because Johnson too should have folded. He should have backed off, reduced our commitment, found an excuse, had people make deals behind our backs—just as could happen now. There are a dozen ways Johnson could have gotten out. Instead he said, "I'm not going to be the man who lost Vietnam, I'm not going to back off, my pecker is longer than Ho Chi Minh's." And so we went to war, on both sides: the pride of kings.

Vietnam taught me that during war, events are really out of the control of the human actors. ●

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